

CHALLENGES OF IMMIGRANT ASSISTANCE

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1. Goals of the IRC working to aid immigrants/refugees

The overall mission of the IRC is to relieve the suffering of refugees, no matter where they are, by whatever means are most effective. Domestically, and especially in California where IRC places more refugees than in any other state, the goal is to restore to them the human dignity, respect and self-determination that they lost in the process of becoming refugees. IRC has long held to the belief that the vast majority of refugees arriving into the United States are best served by helping them establish financial self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. Experience has shown that employment is the key to successful resettlement as among a host of other advantages, it provides them with the ability to make their own decisions.

2. Strategies used in support of self-sufficiency and success

While the IRC provides a wide array of specialized services for particular refugee populations throughout the state, the bulk of initial services designed to stabilize the newcomers such as airport reception, housing, furnishings, clothes and transportation, and linking them with bureaucracies and services they need are delivered through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State. A secondary program called the Matching Grant is designed to place the refugees in a position to succeed. Funded in part by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, the program provides for the delivery of comprehensive, front-loaded services such as intensive English language and employment services, that allow the refugees to attain self-sufficiency quickly and to avoid the use of public assistance. This program also allows for prolonged direct financial assistance for living expenses as well as financial incentives for job retention. As a "matching" program the IRC is required to generate \$1,000 for each refugee, which comes in the form of a combination of both in-kind and cash donations. After nearly 20 years of operating the program I am convinced that the Matching Grant is the program of choice that best meets the needs of newly arriving refugees as it optimizes both the considerable energy that the refugees bring with them as they start a vital new chapter in their lives and the talent and dedication of staff who, as former refugees, provide empathy and invaluable insight into what will be necessary for the newcomers to succeed. As many refugees as possible are enrolled into the MG program within the limitations of funding and refugee employability.

3. How do we know if we are successful?

On a grand scale you know you're successful when an IRC sponsored refugee is Andy Grove who heads a company in Silicon Valley called Intel Corporation which has 86,000 employees, and last year grossed nearly \$34 billion in sales, 10 times California's estimated population. On a lesser scale former refugees have merely become millionaires, such as two young Czechs who arrived speaking no English and ten years later sold the robotics company that they founded with 3 partners for \$185 million. Or there's the Vietnamese refugee who was a fisherman in his home country and now operates the second largest seafood import/export company in the state. You know you're successful when you read in the paper that the restaurant founded by your former Eritrean refugee was voted by food critics the best African restaurant in the San Francisco Bay Area, or you hear from your former Iraqi refugee from the Gulf War that he's been accepted into a PhD program at UC Davis.

Other barometers of success include purchasing homes and refugee students being awarded scholarships to Stanford and others of California's best educational institutions. Steps along the way are seen in refugees attaining the ability to travel, to act as sponsors for their relatives, and to express concern for and participate in solving local community problems.

While there really are too many ways to know that refugees are succeeding to mention here, by far one of the best ways to know is when a former refugee offers to help a newcomer or makes a financial contribution to the IRC.

4. Which needs of refugees are most easily addressed and which present the greatest challenge?

Resettling refugees, I'm afraid, poses almost nothing but challenges for refugees. Perhaps their need to be met at the airport and, at the moment, their need for work might be among the needs most easily met, though the latter can easily change with a downturn in the economy. Currently, affordable housing in many parts of California, is a particular challenge.

Among the greatest challenge for many refugees I believe is overcoming home sickness and a deep sense of loss. Attaining a real sense of comfort with the nuances of American society is another. These can take a very long time. Language acquisition can also be a challenge for many refugees especially those who may have entered the country later in life or may have had little exposure to academics in their home country. Lack of English fluency inhibits many refugees from gaining access to mainstream services that might help them advance more quickly. Lastly I would mention having to abandon professional careers may be among the greatest of challenges faced by those refugees with particular skills and education. This, like many other aspects of resettlement, can be a hard pill for refugees to swallow.